

Engaged Students, Engaged Adults

Teachers enter the profession for a variety of reasons: a passion for children, the love of content, to right a wrong, the security and predictability of a schedule. Regardless of their motivation to enter the profession, many teachers are not staying. Statistics tell us that "annually, approximately 100,000 teachers graduate from our nation's colleges of education. Of that number less than 60 percent will ever enter the classroom after graduating. Of those that do, nearly 50 percent will leave teaching within the first five years" (Hull, 2004). These are staggering statistics! Many researchers have postulated on the reasons for the very high attrition rate of teachers.

One of the primary reasons I have observed for teachers' job dissatisfaction is the inability to establish a relationship with their students and their discouragement with their students' motivation. If a teacher feels he cannot relate to his students or that he cannot connect them to his content, regardless of his efforts, he is likely to get discouraged and flee the profession. The more isolated a teacher's work is the more quickly a teacher becomes dissatisfied and discouraged. This text will explore why teachers are leaving the profession and how we can change the culture to help them find more success with their students and more community within their schools.

Why are teachers leaving?

Buckley, Schneider, and Shang, in a study funded in part by the Ford Foundation and the 21st Century School Fund, suggest that the factors influencing a teacher's decisions to leave the profession are divided into teacher factors, school factors, and community factors. Teacher factors include the relatively low salary ranges, the degree of idealism teachers bring to their job, and the effectiveness of their teacher preparation program. These researchers found that the higher the teachers' idealism, the greater the risk of losing them to attrition. This indicates that high expectations are easily dashed by the demands of the job.

School factors affect the commitment of new and veteran teachers differently. Rosenholtz and Simpson (1990) show evidence that student behavior management and non-teaching responsibilities affect new teachers' decisions to stay in the profession, while experienced teachers are more concerned about the freedom to make and act on their decisions regarding instruction and curriculum. "Other important predictors of teachers' commitment include performance efficacy and psychic rewards" (Buckley, Schneider, Shang 2006). The way a teacher views his or her performance may affect his or her decision to stay in the classroom. If a teacher is feeling overwhelmed and disconnected from her students and colleagues, her psyche may be affected negatively, causing her to consider leaving the profession. If a teacher consistently gets negative feedback from supervisors or clients, he may consider changing his situation. Negative feedback can come from supervisors who, for example, only use summative assessments instead of ongoing feedback and support. It can come from students who are disengaged with the content or activity that the teacher has

presented or prepared.

Other school factors articulated by teachers who have left the field include scarcity of resources, high stakes accountability, and prescribed curricula (Darling-Hammond and Sykes, 2003). These factors may not be easily remediated, but working in a collegial, supportive environment can soften the blow of these external factors. Shortages and mandates can be overcome when a faculty works together toward a common goal.

Community factors contributing to the high attrition of today's teachers include constantly changing educational policies, unfunded mandates from state legislatures and federal government officials, and the costly credentialing processes in many states. Lack of reciprocity among state certification boards may further discourage teachers who relocate to a new state from getting new credentials.

"Another important factor in the retention decision may be the social status of teachers in the broader community" (Tye and O'Brien, 2002). Teachers may feel that the public has misguided and contradictory perceptions of their jobs. The public has high expectations for teachers, yet shows little respect for teachers as professionals. Finally, budget cuts affect a teacher's commitment to stay the course. Budget cuts can determine a teacher's physical plant, supply source, and class size. The uncertainty created by this type of environment can influence a teacher's decision to stay in teaching.

What will make them stay?

Marc Prensky, in his article *Engage Me, or Enrage Me: What Today's Learners Demand*, contends that teachers need to reach three types of students in meaningful ways each day. These types are those that do school well and enjoy it, those that can manage the system successfully but without enthusiasm, and those who refuse to participate because they see no relevancy to their lives in school or school-related activities. Prensky applauds the critical need to engage all students in their academic learning; I extol the need to engage all teachers in their professional learning and development. Just as we are faced with students with different levels of engagement and ability every day, so are we faced with teachers with different levels of commitment to teaching and professional know-how. The National Education Association (NEA) suggests in its *Recruitment and Retention Guidebook* that to keep teachers and to foster their development as professional educators, the following retention strategies must be carefully attended to:

1. Prepare teachers adequately
2. Nurture new teachers
3. Improve the working environment
4. Provide financial incentives

Attending to these retention strategies will engage new and veteran teachers in the business of school and student achievement.

Teacher preparation programs

Recent research by the National Commission on Teaching and America's Future (NCTAF) suggests that adequate preparation significantly reduces the attrition rate of first year teachers. The commission believes strong academic preparation, strong clinical practice, and grounding in modern learning technologies are critical components of a quality teacher preparation program (NEA, 2003).

Modern learning technologies are those instructional strategies that encourage teachers to use, for example, a variety of groupings, multiple assessments, student choice, discovery activities, intentional questioning techniques, and increased wait time when planning their lessons. Teacher preparation programs must ensure that students not only learn about these processes, but that students have time to practice and become proficient at implementing them successfully with children in the classroom. The problem lies in the differences between programs and the skill sets of the candidates who graduate from these programs. Teacher preparation programs require different field experiences and internships for their students. Some depend on the state licensure requirements and some depend on the value placed on these practice-based experiences within the college or university itself.

In response to these differences, the National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE) has developed standards for teacher education programs. Programs accredited by NCATE are endorsed by the NEA and other teacher-governing bodies.

One of these standards suggests the need for cultural education and the articulation of the challenges characteristic of many rural and urban districts in our country. Classroom demographics are ever changing, and teacher preparation programs that stress the need to understand and practice in diverse cultures may reduce the risk of teacher attrition in the future by preparing teachers to find success in many different school environments.

Nurture new (and veteran) teachers

All teachers need room to learn and grow in their work environment. Many schools and districts have programs in place to support new teachers. These include induction programs, mentoring, and new teacher orientation.

Induction programs are designed to have new teachers spend their first year of service orienting themselves to their new environment. Participants in these programs may be new to the profession or to the district. The content of the induction program ranges from administrative tasks to professional learning opportunities. Several professional organizations suggest criteria for effective induction programs. The Southeast Center for Teacher Quality (SCTQ) sets the following criteria for successful induction programs:

1. Provide new teachers with specific expectations
2. Familiarize new teachers with organizational rituals
3. Help new teachers to apply knowledge, skill beliefs, and attitudes necessary to be successful in their jobs
4. Provide new teachers with ongoing guidance and assessment by a trained mentor
5. Assist new teachers in meeting licensure standards

This particular set of criteria exemplifies an exerted effort to connect the new teacher to his or her work context and professional colleagues, thereby engaging participants meaningfully in their own and their students' achievement and success.

When it is implemented well mentoring is another effective strategy for increasing teacher retention rates. Mentors must be carefully selected and well trained (NEA, 2003). The mentoring process must be valued by the school community and monitored for results. Mentoring relationships need time and attention to be successful.

Ingersoll and Kralik state that, "while the impact of induction and mentoring differed significantly among the 10 studies reviewed, collectively the studies do provide support for the claim that assistance for new teachers and, in particular, mentoring programs have a positive impact on teachers and their retention."

It is recommended that in addition to induction programs and mentoring, new teacher orientations be mandated for new teachers. These orientations provide administrative information that allows new teachers to successfully negotiate the policies and procedures of a new school and district. The Educational Research Service (ERS) suggests that new teacher orientations:

- Be held in a comfortable environment
- Introduce district personnel
- Include get-to-know-you activities to connect the new teacher group to one another
- Provide free materials
- Provide information about school policies, calendar, routines, and schedule in a school information binder
- Include a workshop on classroom management that focuses on the need for rules, routines, and procedures
- Include specific information about district policies for violence prevention, crisis intervention, and emergency evacuation
- Introduce mentors to their new teachers and provide time for working together to develop a calendar and next steps (NEA, 2003)

Improve the working environment

The teacher supports and outreach happen outside of the daily work of teaching. To improve the working environment for teachers, schools must move from cultures of isolation to cultures of collegiality and collaboration. An effective mentoring program can begin this process, but we need to do more to engage teachers in their own learning and growth as professional educators. We need to foster an environment that celebrates success, encourages new strategy use, uses formative assessments, and allows time for collegial collaboration and sharing. In other words we need to create a "culture of excellence" (Ferriter and Norton, 2004).

We need to create communities of learners who share a common vision for the success of all students. Just as students must feel connected to their learning and school culture, so must teachers. Providing opportunities for colleagues to learn, share, create, and problem

solve together helps create the kind of environment that will connect teachers with their school community and with their students' learning.

When teachers experience success through student achievement, they are likely to continue to pursue that success. For example, if a teacher reconfigures her classroom to allow for partner sharing, is clear with the students about the procedures involved in this strategy, and is successful in giving more students a chance to share, she is more likely to include that strategy in a future lesson. The school environment has to feel safe for her to try such new student engagement strategies. In a learning environment that is safe for all learners, administrators recognize this strategy as a way to include more student voices in a classroom and encourage its use. Unfortunately, what we often see currently is an administrator questioning the additional movement and noise in this type of classroom.

When students feel heard and supported in their learning, they will be more attentive and more successful with academic content. Success breeds success. Teachers need to be supported in recognizing how their lesson planning affects the engagement and success of students. The "engaged" students in Prensky's article need choice and voice. They need the opportunity to choose their research topic, not whether to do a research project, for example. They need a balance of opportunities to partner and learn in small groups and opportunities for individual reflection and learning. Finally, they need alternate and formative assessments for learning in addition to summative assessments of learning (Reeves, 2004). Students need some choice in culminating unit projects. They also need some opportunity to be creative and to use multiple intelligences, to see the results of their labors, and to be able to edit and improve on their efforts with the guidance of the teacher. These collaborative learning behaviors help engage students and teachers to achieve their goals.

Students come to the classroom with a variety of skills and experiences, and we must work together to create and implement instructional strategies that will reach all of them. To do this we need to examine our practice collaboratively and to share plans, processes and results with one another. We are asking teachers to develop new habits of mind and practice. We are asking that they engage all students. We are suggesting strategies that may mean they have a little less control in a less orderly space with, for example, different desk configurations supporting various small groups and independent activities—some teacher directed, some student directed. This scenario is alien to many new teachers who come to the classroom with a lifetime experience of traditional learning environments designed to serve the few, who might move on to higher education.

We must challenge our new teachers to hang in there long enough to develop their craft so that they can learn to engage all students so they meet their students' needs now and into the future. This will require flexibility and willingness to take risks. The only way to work in the new learning environment we hope to create is to forge relationships between teachers and colleagues, between teachers and students, between teachers and administrators, and between teachers and community. These relationships will engage and connect teachers and students to continuous learning and success.

Professional learning opportunities in this new learning community must model the kinds of

engaging learning we are expecting teachers to facilitate with their students. Those charged with designing and implementing these opportunities must be skilled at designing sessions that provide teachers with relevant content and strategies and skills they can immediately transfer into classroom practice.

Those "enraged students" Prensky describes are not unlike new teachers who want to experience growth, success, and relevance in their learning processes. This professional learning needs to be ongoing, site based, and collaborative. It should mirror the kinds of engaging instruction we are expecting from all teachers of 21st Century learners. Experience is the key to transferring theory and strategy to classroom practice. In designing professional learning opportunities, staff developers, administrators, coaches, and consultants must meet the needs of the teachers they are serving. For example, it is no longer adequate to present a strategy for teachers to implement. The facilitator of today's professional learning must have participants experience the strategy, question the strategy, and have time to consider the strategy in context. After the initial learning opportunity, the facilitator must provide time for reflection, sharing, and modifying to engage teachers in their professional growth. This learning cycle will help teachers make the connection between professional learning and classroom practice; it also reinforces the need for teachers, and students, to be accountable for their learning and successes.

The days of once and done, disconnected professional development opportunities, are over. Daily professional learning and engagement need to become the norm if we expect teachers to be engaged and to engage all students.

Provide financial incentives

Although the NEA suggests financial incentives as an innovation worth considering to boost teacher retention rates, other researchers have found it less important to the teachers they interviewed.

Ferriter and Norton interviewed teachers from the Teacher Leaders Network (TLN) about the motivators that keep them coming back to the classroom year after year. One of the teachers articulated her top three motivators to excel:

- Freedom to use professional judgment in making teaching decisions.
- Appreciation and acknowledgement for effort and accomplishment.
- Opportunities to help make educational decisions that impact teachers' ability to work effectively with every student (Ferriter and Norton, 2004).

These motivators serve as connectors to the work and to the school community, making teachers feel trusted, valued, relevant, and supported. When teachers and students find themselves in this kind of work environment, they will be ready to stay the course and begin a cycle of teachers working to guide and support one another.

While financial incentives are important to some teachers, in my review of the research it is not one of the major motivators for remaining in the profession. More important, in my estimation, are the ability to grow as a professional facilitator of learning; the feeling of

efficacy that develops over time in an environment of mutual learning and respect; and the support of colleagues, administration, and community who are working together to achieve the mutual goal of serving all students well: those naturally inclined to success in school, those adept at negotiating the system, and those resistant to complying and performing under traditional circumstances.

To achieve this goal, we need to "restructure the profession. Such an approach will entail sharing power, providing better training, giving up some traditional assumptions and values, and expressing enormous trust" (Heller, 2004).

Darling-Hammond sees the challenge as follows: "The problem does not lie in the numbers of teachers available; we produce many more qualified teachers than we hire. The hard part is keeping the teachers we prepare" (2003, p.7). The time has come to spend time thinking about engaging teachers to engage their students by offering them the opportunity to learn alongside their students, to be facilitators of learning rather than imparters of knowledge. We need to reach those teachers and those students who are "not quite burned out, but crispy on the edges" (Draper, 2001).

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